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STATE OF THE WORLD'S CITIES 2006/7



The Urban Penalty: Conflict and Natural Disaster

Human conflicts and natural disasters impact cities differently – and often more deeply – than rural areas.

Conflicts lead to the growth and proliferation of slums as displaced people seek refuge at the margins of urban areas; buildings and roads crumble and fall in the wake of major tremors, landslides and floods. The sheer concentration of people and infrastructure in cities often means greater loss of life when disaster strikes, and the social, political and structural capacity of cities to provide shelter for those in need is often limited.

When conflicts or natural disasters hit, they can wreak havoc on urban economies, destroy communities and tear families apart. Such events perpetuate urban poverty, placing additional strains on people and places already burdened by lack of resources.

- In **Sudan**, for instance, urban areas accommodated two-thirds of the more than 6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the country in 1998; almost half of these IDPs moved to the capital city, **Khartoum**. Surveys indicate that the majority of IDPs in **Khartoum** are from **Southern Sudan**, the region most affected by a protracted civil war, and most reside in squatter settlements on the periphery of the city, with little access to basic services.
- In **Azerbaijan**, where conflicts with neighbouring **Armenia** have raged since 1988, the total number of internally displaced persons stands at nearly 1 million. Approximately 40 per cent of the country's displaced population lives in urban areas, which have proven unsuitable and unacceptable for long-term habitation, especially when employment opportunities are scarce.

Natural & Environmental Disasters

Urban settlements are also prone to threats from natural and environmental hazards, and people living in poverty everywhere, especially in urban areas, are most at risk. Substandard housing and construction practices, lack of infrastructure, absence of secure tenure, inappropriate land use and increasingly degraded environments leave large sections of the poorest communities chronically vulnerable.

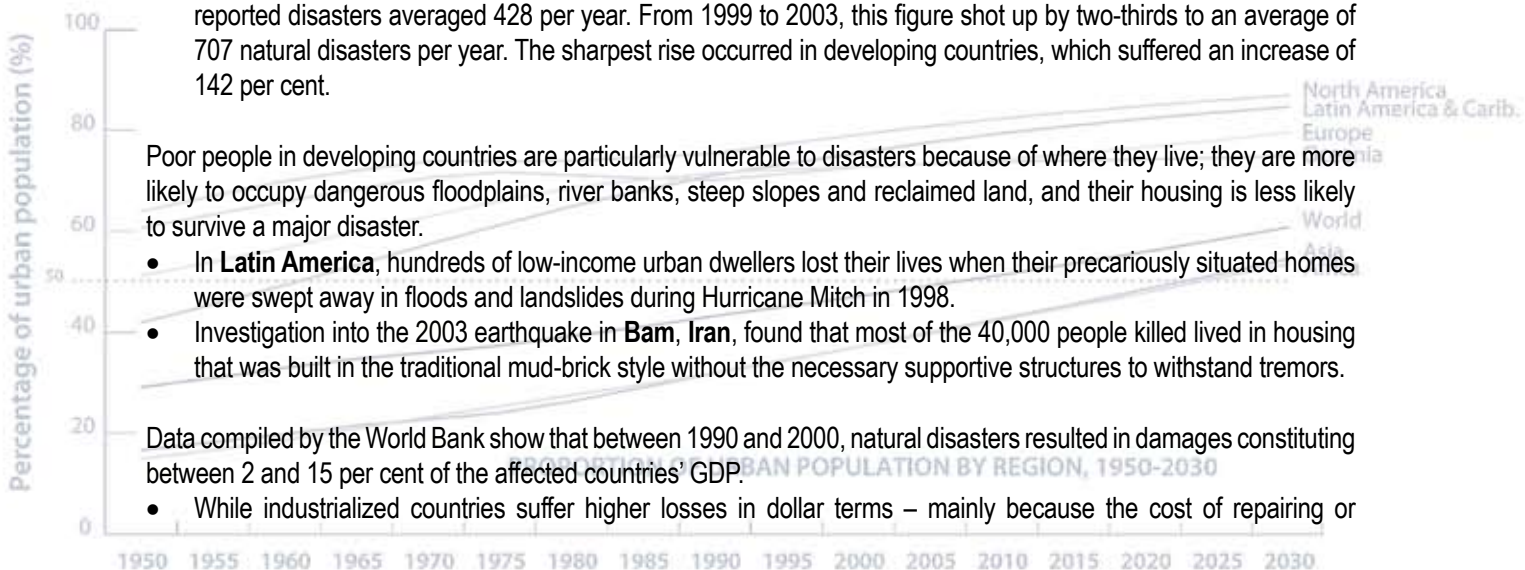
- According to the UN's Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery, some 75 per cent of the world's population lives in areas that were affected at least once by an earthquake, a tropical cyclone, floods, or drought between 1980 and 2000.
- Calculations by the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent show that from 1994 to 1998, reported disasters averaged 428 per year. From 1999 to 2003, this figure shot up by two-thirds to an average of 707 natural disasters per year. The sharpest rise occurred in developing countries, which suffered an increase of 142 per cent.

Poor people in developing countries are particularly vulnerable to disasters because of where they live; they are more likely to occupy dangerous floodplains, river banks, steep slopes and reclaimed land, and their housing is less likely to survive a major disaster.

- In **Latin America**, hundreds of low-income urban dwellers lost their lives when their precariously situated homes were swept away in floods and landslides during Hurricane Mitch in 1998.
- Investigation into the 2003 earthquake in **Bam, Iran**, found that most of the 40,000 people killed lived in housing that was built in the traditional mud-brick style without the necessary supportive structures to withstand tremors.

Data compiled by the World Bank show that between 1990 and 2000, natural disasters resulted in damages constituting between 2 and 15 per cent of the affected countries' GDP.

- While industrialized countries suffer higher losses in dollar terms – mainly because the cost of repairing or



replacing destroyed infrastructure is higher – the overall impact of disasters on the economies of rich countries is negligible.

- According to the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, disasters in industrialized countries have inflicted an average damage of \$318 million per event, compared with \$28 million per event in developing countries. However, industrialized countries are able to quickly recover from the impact of disasters, mainly because of a surge in reconstruction activities and more public spending on rehabilitation of the affected areas.

Disasters can paralyse developing countries, or even permanently destroy their social and economic assets.

- In Aceh, Indonesia, for instance, the total estimate of damage and losses from the December 2004 tsunami was \$4.45 billion – nearly 97 per cent of the region's GDP. Many developing countries also lack the health facilities to deal with large numbers of injured patients, resulting in a higher eventual death toll than in countries better equipped for disaster.
- The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that in the 1990s, natural disasters killed almost seven times more people in developing countries per event than in industrialized countries; an average of 44 people per event died in industrialized countries compared with 300 people per event in developing countries.

Sustainable Recovery

Disasters have serious consequences at every level, from far reaching economic losses to personal hardship for individual families. The broad impacts of disasters exacerbate the fundamental challenges of crisis management and recovery processes: how to bridge the gaps that have repeatedly emerged between emergency recovery and sustainable development efforts, and how to provide all stakeholders with practical strategies to mitigate and recover from crises. The concept of sustainable recovery does not entail an abrupt shift from relief to development, but rather an integrated approach in which those involved attend to basic needs while also supporting longer-term sustainable development.

Understanding urban vulnerability is the first step toward developing mitigation strategies that effectively improve resilience and reduce vulnerabilities of urban populations in the long term. The cornerstone of the implementation strategy is to build a “culture of prevention”, or disaster mitigation, among the society at large. Disaster mitigation not only saves lives but also makes economic sense.

- The World Bank and the U.S. Geological Survey estimate that economic losses worldwide from natural disasters in the 1990s could have been reduced by \$280 billion if \$40 billion had been invested in preventive measures.
- In **China**, the World Bank estimated that the \$3.15 billion spent on flood control since the 1960s has averted losses of about \$12 billion.
- Similarly, more federal funding for the levees in **New Orleans** might have reduced the scale of the tragedy when Hurricane Katrina struck in August 2005.

Medellin, Colombia, provides a good example of successful community-based disaster prevention. In the mid-1980s, following the destruction of the city of **Armero** by mudslides triggered by a volcanic eruption, the **Colombian** government established a National System for Disaster Prevention and Response. When a major landslide struck **Medellin** in 1987, the city and its inhabitants were able to mobilize resources to create a safer living environment, integrating risk management strategies with municipal physical, social and economic planning. Thanks to combined civic education and political and financial commitment, the landslides in **Medellin** decreased from 533 in 1993 to 191 in 1995. Vulnerability reduction plans and disaster risk considerations are ideally integrated into sustainable development policies, planning and programming – in particular at local levels.

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